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| Speak Up- KōrerotiaGender identity 10121 July 2019 |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana, E ngā reo, E ngā hau e whāTēnā koutou katoaNau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”. Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.Nau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” - “Kōrerotia”. I’m Sally Carlton and we’re talking today about “Gender identity 101.” The reason I’ve put the “101” in there is because I think it’s something a lot of people don’t know too much about, and also because there’s so much terminology and vocab involved that it seems a bit like an English lesson in some ways. So we’re going to be thinking about a lot of different terms associated with gender identity and to help us through we have Alice Anderson, who is from Qtopia, and Jennifer Shields, and I’m going to let you guys introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit about your organisations and what you’re here to talk about. Jen was on our show a few years ago looking at “Art and social responsibility” so it’s cool to have you in a different capacity.   |
| Jen | Yeah it’s great to be back. Kia ora my name is Jen. I used shared name pronouns. I sit in a number of different spaces; I’m actually a member of Qtopia’s Board but aside from that I currently am part of a consult co-design group by Pegasus Health with the aim of improving access to gender-affirming care in Canterbury which is great, we’ve made some fantastic changes over the last nine months. Aside from all that stuff I’m also an artist and event producer; my background is in Fine Arts. It’s really interesting for me how those two worlds collide and how often.  |
| Alice | Kia ora whānau, I’m Alice, I use shared pronouns. I am the Executive Director - or the “Professional Aunty” probably more accurately captures what I do - at Qtopia. We’re a social support service for LGBTQIA+ young people, their whānau and their communities and we’re really actively engaged in how we can positively make social change.  |
| Sally | Now, you’ve both said something about pronouns - so jumping straight in with vocab here.  |
| Jen | The pronouns that I use are ‘she’ and ‘they.’ So I use both of them - ‘she,’ ‘her’ and ‘hers’ and ‘they,’ ‘them’ and ‘theirs’ - and that’s just quite a common thing in our circles as part of a standard introduction just so everyone knows how each other like to be addressed.  |
| Alice | Absolutely, just as a sign of respect.  |
| Sally | Alice would you mind explaining LGBTQIA+? |
| Alice | LGBT is probably the terminology that we’re most familiar with, which obviously means Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans. I use LGBTQIA+ which is Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer or Questioning, Intersex and Asexual and then the ‘plus’ is referring to all those that do not have their identity featured in the acronym as yet. What we like to say is be as inclusive as possible. If you can remember all of those that’s wonderful, if you can only remember the plus on your LGBT+, that’s what is really important. And ‘rainbow’ to speak to the community and the experience and is a really kind of gentle way of acknowledging the fact that this is a really diverse community. It’s a really nice umbrella term, especially for those people that don’t have their identifier included in the acronym as yet. So obviously this is not one singular so what’s really important is we pay mind and pay honour to the fact that this is a really diverse group of people all coming together under that one terminology. |
| Sally | I think that’s really important to think about that people might not yet have a term that describes what they feel. Coming back to the acronym for a moment - particularly the ‘T’ for ‘trans’ as that’s the main focus of today’s gender identity discussion - am I correct in thinking younger people tend to use the term ‘transgender’ and might be a bit uncomfortable with the term ‘transexual,’ which is often used by older generations? |
| Jen | Yeah, there’s a lot of tricky discussion that often goes on there, I think a lot of the younger generation interpret it as a bit of an outdated term and also there are some older standards of what it means to be trans that are often aligned with that term ‘transsexual.’ Like, there are people who use it today to mean a trans person who has been on hormone treatment and had the surgery and that term can only apply to them - which isn’t accurate whatsoever; anyone can use it - but I think that’s why a lot of the younger generation are a bit uncomfortable with it because it sometimes has those implications. And I think there’s a lot of maybe… not quite conflict but discomfort between those two generations because one of them really likes that term and one of them really doesn’t but I think it’s important to acknowledge that it’s a valid term of identity that a lot of our elders prefer. |
| Alice | And this is why these conversations are so important, so we can create space for one another to be who we are. |
| Jen | In the acronym we’ve got the ‘Q’ and the ‘A.’ So ‘Q’ standing for ‘Questioning’ but also ‘Queer.’ ‘Queer’ is the term that I personally love it because I feel like it says, “I’m queer” and you don’t need any more detail, you don’t need to know anything else. And it’s often also used as an overarching identity description. Some people are a bit uncomfortable with it because it’s got a bit of a history as a slur but that reclamation process started in the ‘70s and ‘80s with Act Up and all of that and I feel like it’s got a really great history. ‘Questioning’: Anyone who is unsure or thinking about or just doesn’t quite know yet. I think maybe one of my favourite truisms or phrases or mottos is that if you are questioning it, it’s probably valid. And then ‘A.’ There’s lots of talk about the ‘A’ should be for Ace [Asexual] people and not Allies but at the same time there’s a lot of really good discussion about how including Allies in the acronym enables our closeted whānau to safely attend queer events without outing themselves and being able to participate and I think it’s really important that we have spaces that are safe and explicitly for the queer community themselves, we definitely need to have spaces that are also open to people that can’t out themselves. |
| Alice | It’s so important to allow people to self-identify and then to honour the terminology that a person identifies with because it’s really about how we express and understand ourselves and each other. We really want to put one another in a box so we can compute each other, right? But really the human experience is complex and intricate and diverse so we have to allow for that in the language that we use. What I think is so important about finding this terminology is that for so many of our young people that I work with, and for so many of us that are within the queer community, finding the word that fit the feeling that we had was huge. This was like this illumination of who we were. I know that for myself coming out as bi - I now identify as pansexual - but it wasn’t until I was probably in my early teens, having always known I was different, that suddenly I found this word and I was like… My whole life lit up after that. You know what I mean? Because suddenly there wasn’t something wrong with me and there wasn’t something strange or unusual, it was like actually no, this is a community of people, this is an identity that you can share in. And I see that all the time with the young people that I work with as part of our service and how they allow one another the fluidity of exploration of identity. There’s this preconceived notion within external communities, I think, that once you have found who you are it’s that forever but as we know it’s ongoing in terms of who we become. And what we see with our young people is that they are really willing to allow each other to try on different terms, to try on different identities and honour that in that moment. But also, if that shifts and changes, to honour each other there as well. So I think that’s something to learn from that. |
| Jen | Yeah I really like that about Qs groups and maybe it’s just clicked for me as you’ve been talking about it, is that everyone is there and we’re all under this wider umbrella but I don’t think I’ve ever had a discussion with any of those groups about anyone’s exact identity. There’s no need to get into that, everyone is just there because of that shared understanding and that’s really nice.  |
| Alice | Thank you, that’s something we do purposefully as well so that’s if folks choose to identify or would like to have that discussion, there’s always the space to do so but it’s not an expectation when you enter the space that you have to come in and be like, “Hi it’s me and I’m this!” We’re just so happy that you’re there.  |
| Sally | So you’re talking about discussion groups, does Qtopia facilitate people just to come and have a chat?  |
| Alice | Yeah absolutely, for us our job is to hold space, we’re there to provide safe, welcoming spaces for all members of the LGBTQIA+ community to come and connect. We typically have various age ranges and we also have a really wide and diverse group of trained facilitators so there’s always someone there for you to talk to and someone there that has shared experience as well.  |
| Sally | Let’s get a bit more into the terminology then. We’re looking today at gender identity; how would you describe that?  |
| Jen | I think gender identity is your personal and internal sense of your gender and what that is. It may or may not match with the gender you were assigned at birth, which 99 per cent of the time is when a doctor looks at your genitals and decides that’s what that is.  |
| Sally | And so that’s sex rather than gender?  |
| Jen | Yeah, gender or sex assigned at both is the quite common terminology.  |
| Alice | Biological sex sometimes. And it’s important to know that there is a distinction between the two and that gender identity - to build on what Jen has said - very much comes from your own personal sense of self, what’s in your heart, how you identify, what’s true to yourself and wairua. So that’s why it’s important that we create that distinction from one another because we have really interconnected this idea between sex and gender and actually they’re completely different things.  |
| Jen | I think at the same time a lot of us or in society we have this view of sex as a solid immutable one or two things whereas actually we know that like it’s very variable. Beyond the binary, there’s a whole range of intersex conditions.  |
| Sally | I think that’s a really good point, too, is that we think of sex as being binary and it’s not so surely gender is not binary either. Another point, I guess, to clarify for the audience is gender identity versus sexual identity and how those two differentiate and why is it important, again, that they’re not conflated? |
| Jen | I think it’s really easy because we’re all in this one community under a large umbrella to assume a lot of those things but actually they’re two very distinct parts of our identities and you can have any from the long list of sexual identities and any from the long list of gender identities. There’s no reason why one should mean the other or vice versa.  |
| Sally | Good way of putting it, I think. Are there any other terms you think we probably need to run through before we get into our conversation? I’ve written down just as a starting point: ‘Cisgender’, ‘transgender’, ‘gender diverse’ and ‘gender neutral’.  |
| Alice | When we talk about ‘cis’ and ‘cisgender’, so that is when the sex you were assigned at birth matches with your gender identity. And then ‘trans’ speaking to the sex you were assigned at birth not matching your gender identity or being different. ‘Gender diverse’ is kind of an umbrella term which speaks to the variance in experience of gender identity, that there’s no fixed form or point and it’s just important to acknowledge those that fall outside and in-between this gender binary that we seem to have. Then coming to ‘gender neutral’, to speak to folks that concept of gender that does not align with them at all, and sometimes that is referred to as ‘non-binary,’ as well.  |
| Sally | And how does that tie in with asexual? |
| Alice | Gender and sexuality being very different, so gender being about identity and who we are and sexuality being about who we are attracted to. So asexual - or ace - the ace community do not feel that sexual attraction or there is a spectrum of sexual attraction that they experience.  |
| Sally | Great, just moving slight here, thinking about if we have a sense of numbers or percentages of people who do identify as gender diverse, because it’s not small.  |
| Jen | I think in New Zealand probably the most recent data was from 2012 in our schools, so there’s the Youth 2000 series of surveys where they go into a number of different schools across the country and ask a whole number of questions. ‘Youth 12’ in 2012 is the first time they asked about gender identity and it was quite huge - I’m not going to remember the exact percentages off the top of my head - but something about the total came to nearly 4 per cent of students who were either trans or gender diverse or unsure and questioning which is massive. I was at the Trans Health Care Symposium in Hamilton in May - it’s the first one we’ve had in this country - and there we got to see some preliminary results from the ‘Counting Ourselves’ survey which was a massive survey into trans experiences of health and wellbeing, and about just under 1500 people responded. And within that data - although it doesn’t look at how many of us are in the population - what I found really interesting was that nearly half of the people who responded were identified as non-binary which is definitely a percentage we’ve seen increase quite rapidly over the years.  |
| Alice | And definitely a trend that we see within the membership of our organisation, as well. So for example our youth group which is for our young people aged around 13-18 - and we typically will get up to 50 young people every week attending that group - and I would say nearly half of them identify as trans, gender diverse, or non-binary.  |
| Jen | I think it would be really interesting when we finally get included in the Census to see what that population level data is like.  |
| Sally | Yes the Census is a really interesting one and it’s interesting you say 2012 was the first time they asked about gender diversity; it’s not that long ago. But you’re right, things are changing and I think we will get more into that as we go on. We might have our first song now, Jen have you got a suggestion?  |
| Jen | Yes I was going to suggest ‘Transgender Dysphoria Blues’ by Against Me. Against Me are like a punk act from the States who probably about five years ago, the lead singer and front person came out and transitioned and it was a very public transition and it was just fantastic. And then the next album was entirely about trans issue and trans content and it was great. So this is the lead single from that album.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY AGAINST ME – TRANSGENDER DYSPHORIA BLUES** |
| Sally  | You’re listening to “Speak Up” - “Kōrerotia” on Plains FM, 96.9 and we’re talking today about gender identity. We’ve been talking about the huge array of terms associated with gender diversity and how many ways in which people can try and express their identity. I would think that the variety of terminology is in one respect a means of trying to come to terms of exactly what people want to describe themselves as or how they want to explain how they’re feeling, and how that’s difficult within our society that tends to operate within a male/female pretty rigid binary.  |
| Alice | We live in heteronormative society, so what we mean by that is the entire world is set up to cater to this idea that there are men and there are women and there is nothing outside or in-between and men are attracted to women and that’s that. And we know that none of that is actually real, right, but the constructs by which we live our life, our society constructs, how the world operates, is set up to support these ideals. But there are so many people whose experiences fall outside of that and that’s the work we are engaged in, is how we create a world that is more inclusive to everyone so everyone has space to be themselves.   |
| Jen | Yeah I think a really good example of how our society is constructed that way came out a lot in all the various marriage equality fights that happened around the world. Some of the biggest ones in the States where we had so many stories of, like, a queer person being in hospital and their long-time partner was unable to visit them because they’re not technically family and that’s kind of a right that’s only afforded to married people. There are similar issues around immigration and stuff: so many rights were afforded to people that were married that were systemically excluding queer people because they couldn’t get married and that was a huge reason for that fight to happen. There are so many little bits of our society - whether that’s legal structures or just social norms - that not only hold up this heteronormative structure but continue to enforce it so it’s a bit of a self-replicating system.  |
| Alice | Think about your shopping experience, for example. Like entering a department store like Kmart or The Warehouse and the fact that everything is segregated by male and female. Especially if you’re thinking about the kids’ section for example: You’ve got boys’ toys over here and they all centre around building and creation and wheels and that type of stuff and then you’ve got the girls’ section which is all pink and centres around oh you can dress up and look pretty and bake a cake and have a fluffy animal. There’s nothing wrong with that if that is how a young person chooses to identify but we know there are so many folks that don’t. But these structures are enforcing this gender binary which is actually damaging for everyone. If we look at the spectrum of masculinity for example especially in a country like New Zealand, where on the far end of that we have some really toxic masculinity - look at the suicide rate amongst males, look at our domestic violence rates - this expectation of what a man should be have negative impact on men that are cisgendered as well. So if we allow one another more fluidity, more space, more room to be who we really are. If we stop enforcing this hard binary of what it is to be male and what it is to be female, the better it will be for everybody.  |
| Jen | you mentioned the vast array of identities that exist and I think in the last decade or so we’ve started to see more and more and more kind of almost hyper-specific identity labels. Like within the ace spectrum we’ve got things like ‘grey ace’ which means someone who kind of maybe sometimes feels some kind of sexual attraction but not all the time, then like ‘demi-sexuality’ which means only starting to feel sexual attraction once there’s an emotional bond that’s formed. I think this need we have within our community and especially in our youth to have these hyper-specific labels is because the wider system that we’re in loves boxes and even though the box that you’re putting yourself in isn’t supported by the wider world, it can be nice to be in a box. Which I think is one of the reasons why I like ‘queer’ is because it’s not a box.  |
| Alice | It’s an experience! |
| Jen | Yes personally it feels really good for me to recognise some of those boxes and actually go, “No, I’m going to step away from all of that.”  |
| Sally | I think you’re right, though, the need to identify and label is very overwhelming.  |
| Jen | And it’s extremely validating as well. I definitely had a period in my late teens where I went and found all these very specific labels for each part of my identity and it was extremely validating because along with those labels there’s also communities attached to them and it means when you come across, like, a very specific term, this describes a small but important part of me that I feel like is very different to everyone else but here’s thousands of people who also use this term and I’m not alone. And I think that’s a huge, huge part of that identity formation and labelling experience.  |
| Sally | You’ve just made me think about now that I’m listening to you talk, has the internet helped with this, do you think? |
| Jen | Absolutely, yes. Like the terms that I referenced - ‘grey ace’ and ‘demisexual’ - have kind of formed online communities and social media and stuff like that. I think that’s kind of drastically changed kind of how our community operates. We’re in a really interesting situation, I think, if you look at the queer community internationally compared to say ethnic communities or other communities, we’ve got this bit of a unique situation where we lost a lot of our elders, we lost a lot of the people who came before us in the AIDS crisis. That means there’s been like a severing of history, that intergenerational handing down of information hasn’t happened in the same way. I think the formation of online communities and the reason they formed so strongly has been a way to combat that severing and that loss. |
| Alice | And the erasure, as well.  |
| Jen | Yes absolutely. I think it’s great but I’m really interested in finding ways to connect with the history and bring it into our youth and make sure that information gets passed on.  |
| Sally | I can imagine as well if you’re particularly young and questioning, being able to have a good old Google and sort things out before you feel the need to talk with anybody might be quite affirming.  |
| Jen | Absolutely.  |
| Alice | Especially when we think about our young people that are kind of at the mercy of geographical isolation, I think, a lot. And we do a lot of work with young people who are in the regions of the South Island and for them, the experience of feeling different is so compounded by the fact that you are so separate from support services or from other people like you, so the internet is a lifeline for so many young people who are feeling so alone for so many different reasons to venture out into this cyber world and find their people, it’s very affirming.  |
| Sally | When somebody doesn’t feel they fit their gender binary, how hard is that?  |
| Jen | Yup extremely, speaking from experience. There are as many different journeys and pathways in this community as there are people. But there are commonalities. There’s the common experience of being what we’d describe as a binary trans person who is going from one binary gender to another. Then there’s those that don’t fit in-between and so many of us kind of just swing back and forth on our journeys, where we go one way and go oh no, back a little bit and shuffle around. But going back to talking about the heteronormative structures of our society, it can be really hard to exist as someone who exists outside of that binary. From as simple things as people not addressing you the right way to not actually being able to fill in a form properly because it doesn’t provide options. The amount of times myself and people I know have technically had to lie on government forms because they don’t provide the right information or right boxes.  |
| Sally | There’s also - I hesitate to bring this up because it puts a dampener on everything - but there’s incredibly high self-harm statistics from people who are gender diverse.  |
| Jen | Yes our community sees massive rates of negative outcomes in terms of health, we’ve got huge problems with homelessness and substance abuse and suicide and self-harm. One of the data points that came out of ‘Counting Ourselves’ was something about 50 per cent of our community have wanted but not been able to access mental health care in a funded service which is huge, really, really huge.  |
| Alice | And for us in the work that we do, our young people have the worst health and wellbeing outcomes across the youth sector. It’s incredible to think about. There are so many barriers to being able to access service. It’s actually about, when you get there, will the person that I am speaking with be able to affirm who I am? Will they have any understanding of what I’m actually experiencing? Because our young people in some ways are the most informed generation in the history of the world, they have this self-knowledge, but then when they go to these places that are supposed to be able to provide service and support for them, for them to not recognise each other… It’s very complex for our young people to actually feel seen.  |
| Jen | On the flipside of that there’s a very easy solution which is just treating trans people and our youth with care and respect and validating them. We were out in the Rangiora Pride Picnic which happens every year and I was sitting there watching these trans kids who were 4, 5, 10, just out there living their lives, they have supportive families and we know that’s the number one thing that improves a lot of those outcomes. If they have supportive families and supportive communities around them, then those negative outcomes just drop drastically.  |
| Sally | We’ve been talking here primarily about western cultures with this heteronormative lens. However, that’s not necessarily the case across indigenous cultures, particularly. Unfortunately we haven’t got somebody here who can really talk to the Māori or Pasifika view but I know that many indigenous cultures don’t see gender as a binary but more as a spectrum and I guess if you’ve got any comments to that?  |
| Jen | Yeah I mean we know all across the Pacific and other indigenous cultures that prior to colonisation queer and trans identities really similar to what we recognise today, were totally accepted and valued and there are quite a number of cultures around the world where actually people that we would describe today as trans or non-binary were actually highly respected and almost spiritual and leaders. In Maori we have the term takatāpui which is used today to describe anyone under that rainbow umbrella. We also know that we’ve lost terminology in the process of colonisation, there are words that previously existed to describe these identities in te reo that no longer do. I’ve been finding it really interesting watching in the international online discourse, people judging places that had been colonised for their backwards views on gender when it’s actually the western world that’s come in and put these backwards views on and then we step back and go oh that’s not great, but it was our fault in the first place.  |
| Sally | Our next song is ‘Angel Boy’ by Randa. |
| Jen | And Randa is a New Zealand trans and non-binary musician.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY RANDA – ANGEL BOY** |
| Sally | This is “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia” and we’re talking about gender diversity with Jennifer Shields and Alice Anderson. When people identify as gender diverse, is there a standard age or standard pathway. Jen, you’ve mentioned that some of the kids can be really young but I imagine that a lot of people take quite a long time to come to terms with or recognise perhaps their gender identity. Is there a pathway that people tend to take?  |
| Alice | What we see a lot in our community is, especially with our trans children, for them it is when they are faced with schooling, when they enter primary school, that they suddenly go, “Hang on a minute, I fall outside out of these two options that I’m being given” and their experience at home or at kindy prior to that where gender is not really an issue, you just are who you are but suddenly when they enter education which does a lot of separation based on gender, it can be really confronting for our young people. And we do see some seed being planted there that continues to grow and develop and blossom. There’s no correct pathway and just because you didn’t know when you entered school does not invalidate your experience discovering your gender either, but that is something from the work that we have seen.  |
| Jen | Absolutely, I’ve got a friend, an amazing mother who has this young child who has always been able to dress however he likes and has always picked bright colours, tutus, all the amazing things, and a couple of years ago when he was about to start primary school had this horrible couple of weeks where he started pulling all the girl clothes out of his closet and was like, “Mum, chuck them away, I can’t wear these” and she was devastated and he hadn’t even started school, it was just that prospect of even those couple of months before entering the schooling system, that starts to get enforced. And bless his heart he changed his mind, sweet little thing and is still a fabulous child. But definitely starting to see it younger and younger and a lot of people get very anxious about that. But realistically there is no downside to supporting and validating your child in their gender expression, no matter what way it is. There’s so much tabloid nonsense about child sex changes which is absurd and not a thing that happens anyway. The only medical intervention that happens with kids is when they are just about to hit puberty and they will take puberty blockers which literally just prevent the onset of puberty to give them time to start going through the system and to be really sure of what they want and if it gets to the point where they go, “Actually, no I’m not trans” then you take them off the puberty blockers, they go through puberty and that’s it. There’s no long term impact, there’s nothing whatsoever. All that’s happened is they’ve been supported which is fantastic and what we should be doing for every child. We kind of see common pathways but as I mentioned for every one of us there’s a different journey, people go off in different directions and come around.  |
| Alice | Absolutely and there’s no right way and there’s no regular time frame. This is just about allowing people to be who they really are when they arrive at that knowledge and being supportive in our understanding and to have communities around that are able to provide that awhi and support for one another. But this is also about broader education so that we feel really equipped and armed with the knowledge and the understanding and the terminology to support everybody.  |
| Sally | You mentioned puberty and I would think that adolescence is probably a time a lot of people come to acknowledge their sexual identity, but you think maybe gender identity awareness takes place earlier?  |
| Alice | I think in some cases it can. Gender being a social construct, right? So it’s not something a young person has ever had to consider before they enter an environment where suddenly this binary, this male or female is really enforced so we can kind of see the correlation there and why that is really a point of discovery, as we would call it. Again we want to enforce that just because gender diverse or trans folks did not have this feeling in childhood does not invalidate their identity or their own knowledge of themselves in any way. It’s just something we have seen.  |
| Sally | If someone chooses to identify as gender diverse, how might they go about that? Is it simple a matter of saying I’d like to have a neutral pronoun now? Change your name?  |
| Jen | Yeah, it can be quite a long process and we kind of see maybe what we’d call three different strands. So there’s the social transition which is things like changing how you dress, how you look and your appearance and changing pronouns and name and stuff like that. There’s the legal stuff which is changing documents to reflect who are, updating your birth records and names and things like that. Then there’s the medical side which could be anything from hormones to surgery to other interventions. What we generally see is people pick and choose from each strand as they’re needed but quite often the social stuff is the first step and that in itself can be really long. I am quite an impulsive person, I think… It took me a long time to realise who I was. I actually have a really vivid memory of being about 15 or so and just having this thought of like, “What if I’m trans? Oh god I hope not, they have such a hard time.” Then it took about two years of going through different identities before coming to who I am and that’s continued to evolve. But I think actually when I started to change my name it was very much like an overnight decision, I think at 3pm or 4pm I was talking to some friends online and I was like, “Hey do you want to try using this name for me?” and by the end of the night it was like, “Cool, this is it now.” But a lot of other people will tell a couple of people and then they’ll sit with them using that name for months and months before they decide to start telling us and it’s the same thing with pronouns and it can be quite a… a process… of settling within yourself and teasing out what feels right and what doesn’t and what feels comfortable and what doesn’t and beginning to settle it all down.  |
| Alice | And that there’s no right or wrong pathway to follow, it’s just really about how we all navigate this journey of identity that we are all on regardless of how we identify and just allowing ourselves this space and time and compassion to follow that path, to be who we are.  |
| Sally | I think one thing that is quite interesting and I hadn’t necessarily thought about too much until I was thinking about questions for this: I guess I’d always thought it’s a really personal thing to make that call and however slowly or fast you choose to make that transition, but that transition is also affecting everybody else. You’re asking somebody to start calling you something different, changing your birth certificate for example is going to impact on how your parents are feeling and there’s going to be a lot of other people who are affected, positively or negatively, by that decision. Any comment you guys have to that would be great.  |
| Jen | It can be really tough and it can be really hard as the person who is transitioning because it’s so much to deal with, it kind of becomes your main focus and rightly or wrongly it can be really hard to recognise other people’s…how they are affected. In some cases I think that’s valid, like if someone is just straight up, “No I won’t call you that” then I think that’s a bit shit and you’d be right to be annoyed with them but at the same time…I don’t know, I’ve really come around to the journey my mother went through. She definitely had a hard time with it but now she’s deaf and works out at van Asch and now is always chatting to friends and coming up with new and updated signs for new terminology which is really sweet. She’s fantastic. But it’s definitely a thing that affects a lot of people and I think there are definitely people I’ve had to leave behind because of it and I think a lot of us will have that experience.  |
| Alice | One identifier that we didn’t speak to in our acronym is that the ‘A’ can sometimes stand for ally so this is the idea of being a support and friend to those that identify in a community outside of your own. This allyship is really important for those of us who are cis to provide the space of awhi and understanding for folks that are navigating transition because it falls outside of our understanding, right?, this is not how the experience we are going through. And so when we centre ourselves in it, when we say oh it’s really tricky for me to remember your name change or remember your pronoun then that’s incredibly disrespectful because it’s invalidating the experience and journey that this person is on. And it can be challenging to do this reprogramming, right?, but we can do hard things, we really can so it’s important we are patient with one another and that we are of support to each other. I think a lot of times there is a barrier that folks can feel with offering their support because they’re so worried about getting it wrong and are so worried about saying the wrong thing or using the wrong pronoun and so they can allow that to really keep themselves from better acts of allyship, from being of more support even though they feel that in their hearts. What’s important to remember is that we’re all learning, we’re all learning at this time and that if we do make mistakes then what we do is we just apologise and we correct ourselves and move on because when we allow a misgendering or the wrong use of pronouns to derail a conversation then you’re actually putting all that pressure on the person that you have offended - not that you meant to but you have - to kind of be the one that gets the conversation back on track. They are the one that has to do the emotional labour to make you feel better when really we could just say ‘I’m very sorry”, use the correct pronoun and continue the conversation.  |
| Jen | And I think a lot of the time there’s that kind of feeling to talk to the person who is transitioning about how much trouble you are having with it which can be really, really tough and something that I really appreciated recently is how many support groups there are that are for friends and family of trans people that don’t have those trans people in them. There’s a really great Facebook group for parents of trans kids and the trans kids are not in that group, it’s just the parents, which enables them to ask the stuff that I personally don’t want to hear. I love mum, I know she has a hard time, and I don’t want to hear her asking gnarly questions about how she’s dealing with that sort of stuff. But for that space to exist where those allies and families and friends of trans people can share what they’re struggling with and help each other to ultimately better support the trans people in their lives in a way that doesn’t put the labour onto those trans. Having that space away from the trans people where you’re able to ask the stupid questions that you might not want to ask when they’re around. |
| Alice | I’m a big believer that all anyone really needs is a safe space to ask their dumb questions and there are no dumb questions because we’re all learning. That’s why I think compassion and understanding is so important in this space, that we treat everyone with grace as well because we are all going through this uncovering and it is really layered and really complex and I sit in a lot of spaces with the families of trans and gender diverse young people and there is a real spectrum of experience. And of course, because this young person that you have this solid understanding - you think - of who they are, now wants to change and blossom and transform into something else and that can be a real process of grief for some families. But the reality is, your young person is who they have always been, you are just supporting them to be who they really are.  |
| Sally | That’s a really good way of looking at it. Are you noticing that schools are pretty supportive of this?  |
| Alice | Again, it’s a spectrum, we have some schools that are… It’s a real core focus for them and they’re really progressive and understanding and we often find where these spaces work best is where the leadership really has inclusion at the heart of their focus and that’s just like a core tenant of the school, that’s where we see it work best. Obviously there is a spectrum in terms of our understanding but we do know that so many of our young people who identify within the community are really passionate about creating changes in their environments and that includes their schools. So often the shifts we see towards better inclusion of rainbow identities is actually really driven by young people as so much kind of cultural and social change is,. And then what we see is them finding that one really good ally or advocate within the school - be it a teacher or a guidance counsellor or someone on the executive or whathaveyou - and that seems to be able to drive really positive change. So there’s definitely movement in the right direction but there’s more to be done.  |
| Sally | Cool well this next song ties in really well to this idea of schools and gender identity. You’ve chosen ‘Solitude’ by Hybrid Rose and there was a bit of a history behind this song.  |
| Jen | Yes so Hybrid Rose is another trans musician, she actually went to an all-girls school and was accepted and then all of a sudden ran into issues when some of the staff and community around the school sort of changed their mind and all of a sudden she was having issues with bathroom access and all that sort of stuff. Now she’s graduated and moved on, it was a couple of years ago now but fantastic trans musician based in Wellington.  |
| Sally | Actually you’ve just reminded me, we actually did a show a few years ago looking at access to bathrooms so if anyone is keen you should check that out too.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY HYBRID ROSE – SOLITUDE** |
| Sally  | We’re talking about gender identity. I think that society is becoming more open to thinking about and talking about and including different gender identities. I think we’re becoming a little bit less set on this idea of gender as a binary, I would like to hope and think so. How is New Zealand doing in terms of recognising gender diversity?  |
| Jen | Times are definitely changing, the legal side we’re pretty good, a sticking point currently is the process for changing birth certificates. Changing a passport is just a statutory declaration, you just sign a form and write a thing saying I’m doing this because all this and it’s witnessed by a Justice of the Peace and that’s that. A birth certificate for some reason is a family court process so it can be very intimidating, it can be expensive, it’s not so transparent or clear because a lot of the process depends on which judge you see and there’s a whole heap of stuff that goes on there. We were very, very close to changing the legislation - there was a bill in Select Committee that had really good changes in it and had been consulted on and was all set and ready to go - and all of a sudden there was a bit of a coordinated campaign of realistically a small group of people in New Zealand backed up by a large number of people from the UK because they have a similar process around what we call self-identification on legal documents. A lot of their concern is completely unfounded but they based it around, “Oh well if anyone can change their birth certificate then men are just going to walk into changing rooms and rape people” which is absurd, has never happened. We have a long, long list of when a similar debate was happening in the States around bathroom access - there was a list of I think about 50 or so organisations who work in the domestic abuse and sexual abuse sector - who said actually, since bathroom access laws have changed in these states, none of that has happened. So it’s completely unfounded but because it was such a strong coordinated campaign, Tracy Martin ended up pulling the bill. So that’s still up in the air and is kind of the final sticking point on the legal process in New Zealand I think.  |
| Alice | But we have faith! We’ll get there and I think it’s important to know that there are so many passionate and dedicated people working to create positive and lasting change for this community, whether they identify within it or without it. So we are moving in the right direction but, again, there is still work to be done.  |
| Sally | One thing that strikes me as really positive - and we’ve touched on this again, as well - is that young people are so much more open and aware of gender identity. I guess, moving forward, that can only be a good thing.  |
| Jen | Definitely. Like I said, like seeing kids that are so, so young just be completely validated. I once knew someone who I think was only a year younger than me but because they’d gone through quite a progressive school in the middle of Wellington, was actually the popular kid because they were trans. Which just blew my mind because my high school, the very, very small gay/straight alliance met in the counsellor’s offices with the blinds closed. So to see that shift and so rapidly and comparatively such a little time, like seeing kids who are children, absolute children, who are supported and validated by their family and the people around them is amazing. They’re going to have such fantastic lives; it’s great.  |
| Alice | We see such a huge difference in terms of our membership in our folks that identify as trans or gender diverse and their experience and how that compares to even our young people who are coming up, say through our youth group. So there’s only really say five years difference between some of these folks but what they have experienced is radically different. So progress is being made and it is being made fast and I’m not saying we are there yet because there is so much left to do but it is indicative of how rapidly change is happening. It creates a really interesting dynamic within these communities because there is such a vast spectrum of experience in terms of acceptance and in terms of whether the transition was positive or negative or what the challenges were. There are so many shared factors but at the same time, how they are received and perceived by their communities and the people around them varies really drastically.  |
| Sally | What is needed, do you think, for both these young people who are quite open and have quite good awareness and also perhaps the older generation who has less of an awareness? What’s needed to help them get on board? |
| Alice | I think if we’re talking about say general population rather than just within the communities, it’s education. It really is around education and it’s about, like we said earlier, holding space for people to ask the questions that they have and to be received with grace and we do a lot of this work. It’s not about a stand-and-deliver presentation and now you are a master in inclusion, right?, it’s really about how we facilitate conversations and how we change people or how we address people’s unconscious bias and how we really kind of sit in a space and go, “It’s actually ok to broaden your understanding here.” What we’re working towards is a world where it is safe to exist for everybody so that’s no challenge to you.  |
| Sally | So if someone listening to this now had some dumb questions if we want to label them like that, could they just get in touch with Qtopia?  |
| Alice | Absolutely, that’s what we’re here for. Always here for a cup of tea and a yarn and I think that’s how social progress is made more than any other way is how we connect with each other better. So yes, please do get in touch, we’d love to speak.  |
| Sally | Anything you’d really like to say before we wind up?  |
| Jen | I just want to mention quickly that I run a queer history series because I’m really interested as I said in bringing that history together and sharing and learning together. It’s usually on a Wednesday at Space Academy. We do film screenings and read stuff and chat about it. And that’s a really fun thing and something I’m really passionate about. Queer history is such a key part to keeping this rolling.  |
| Alice | So follow Glitter Box Pursuits on Facebook and Instagram! And by that mark, Qtopia. So we run a really wide range of social support groups, we’ve got groups for rainbow whānau and young people under 12, we have our youth group that I have mentioned which is for anyone around 13 to 18. We have specialist support for our trans and gender diverse whānau and we also have an Over 18s group. So these groups meet regularly, they’re full of really cool passionate people, it’s an opportunity to just come and meet some folks within your community, make new friends, have a yarn and talk to the facilitators to get further information if you’re looking to navigate any transition or just have questions about who and where you are. I am always available to sit down and have a yarn and cup of tea about any of this, so please get in touch and you can find us on Facebook and Instagram, as well as our website which is [www.qtopia.org.nz](http://www.qtopia.org.nz)   |
| Sally | Perfect. Well, kia ora both of you, for coming in and sharing what’s been such a rich discussion.  |